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# What's Wrong with Domination?

**Abstract:** The article examines the concept of 'domination' as it is treated in the second edition of Steven Lukes' *Power a Radical View* (2005). It argues that Lukes' conception of domination is preoccupied with the condition of being dominated, neglecting to adequately define dominance and the relationship of domination. This conceptual imbalance is closely related to intrinsic problems of distinguishing between domination and 'social control' more generally. The conclusion offers a provisional, disaggregated 'ensemble' of concepts for talking about different modes of domination with different attendant moral implications, suggesting a need for a less monolithic conception of domination.

## I. Introduction

The title is rhetorical, and not meant to suggest that there is nothing wrong with domination, but rather to alert us to the fact that our answer depends on what we mean by 'domination', and what we think counts as instances of domination. Normally when we talk about domination, we mean that some individual, or more likely group, or institution exercises an ongoing, pervasive and diffuse control over some population. The pervasive and diffuse nature of domination further suggests that this control is often achieved in highly conventionalised, routinised ways, not only through direct efforts to control. And those we understand as 'dominant' are often not so much self-defined groups as privileged strata of society, whose 'domination' is

difficult to parse from wider forces of social order. This leads to generic difficulties in pinning down what exactly we mean by a relationship of domination.

This essay engages critically, but I hope constructively, with one of the most valiant and influential attempts to date to wrestle with these definitional difficulties. The main stimulus for the argument is Steven Lukes' second, expanded edition of *Power: A Radical View* (2005). In the new book Lukes elaborates his position, making it clear that his 'three-dimensional view of power' concerns 'power as domination' (2005: 12; 109-110) rather than power in general. This invites us to look more specifically at the concept of domination, and the many ambiguities in its usage, as a way of better understanding Lukes' incisive and influential attempt to formulate a basis for the critique of social power as domination. I argue that while better specified than before, Luke's three-dimensional view of *domination* is still problematical in three respects. First, it is weighted toward conceptualising the condition of being dominated, to the neglect of that of being dominant, and the relationship of domination. Second, Luke's disregard for the role of intention in domination, weakens the critical force he wants his concept to have. And third, his concept is overly broad, failing to make important distinctions between different modes of the social shaping of beliefs, motives, desires and behaviours.

## **II. Lukes' argument from the first to the second edition of PRV**

It is best to begin by offering my general understanding of the argument Lukes' puts forward. The main contours of Lukes' original (1974) argument are well known. Responding to the 'pluralist' and 'behaviourist' approaches to the study of power

emanating from Yale University and articulated by Robert Dahl (1961), Nelson Polsby (1963), and others, he sought to counter the view that social power can be adequately understood as success in realising a preferred outcome in a process of overt conflict between interests, in the context of formal governmental decision procedures for managing such conflicts. He accepted the critique of ‘pluralism’ offered by Bachrach and Baratz (1963), that some social conflicts are routinely marginalised from the arenas of public decision-making, and that this too is part of how power operates. He went much further however, in proposing that the study of power needs to be detached from a preoccupation with overt instances of conflicting interests, which only ever provide a partial view of the workings of power, and instead grounded on a more extensive working hypothesis about the potential range of preferences, interests, and possibilities, that could, with the alteration of some variables, conceivably come into play in any given context of power relations. In other words, Lukes insisted, with great insight, that power is not just about manifest conflicts over ‘the actual’, but also about latent conflicts over ‘the possible’, and that social researchers may sometimes be better able to survey the relevant range of possibilities, and to reasonably imagine alternative historical paths, than those subject to those possibilities. Thus Lukes’ position was ‘radical’ not only politically, but also epistemologically.

Two observations are worth making here at the outset. First, that the pluralists themselves were making a critique the ‘elite’ theories of social power in the United States of the mid-twentieth century, generated by C Wright Mills (1956) and Floyd Hunter (1953) and current more generally in the crop of ‘community power’ studies that arose in the 1960s (see Aiken and Mott 1970; Hawley and Wirt 1968). In one

sense Lukes' was reaffirming the radical, critical stance of Mills and Hunter (Lukes 2005: 2) in response to the *de facto* conservatism of the pluralist position. But in another sense he was making a significant departure from those earlier critiques, in that he was turning his attention away from defining a population of elites and how they dominate, and toward the deleterious effects of domination on the dominated. As he summarised the position he was adopting:

The radical, however, maintains that people's wants may themselves be a product of a system which works against their interests, and, in such cases, relates the latter to what they would want and prefer, were they able to make the choice (2005: 38).

Secondly, the entire set of debates that in a sense culminated in the original PRV has often been taken as a fairly comprehensive sampling of core issues in the study of power. But it is worth remembering how heavily these discussions were shaped by the specific context of analysing power within a uniquely geopolitically powerful liberal democracy of the time. The ideas generated by these debates are much less easily applied to situations where there is a lack of stability in political and economic institutions, and power is characteristically pursued by extra-parliamentary, self-help, and often violent means.

Moving on to the second edition of PRV, as I have already said, one of the most fundamental shifts in the argument is Lukes' acknowledgement that his real concern is not with power in general, but with the question: 'how do the powerful secure the compliance of those they dominate?' (2005: 110). Reflecting on how his own

argument got steered by one of the dominant 'behaviourist' formulas of the debate at the time, he remarks:

It was a mistake to define power by 'saying that *A* exercises power over *B* when *A* affects *B* in a manner contrary to *B*'s interests'. Power is a capacity not the exercise of that capacity (it may never be, and may never need to be, exercised); and you can be powerful by satisfying and advancing others' interests: *PRV*'s topic, power as domination, is only one species of power (2005: 12).

Thus in essence Lukes' definition of domination is the same as the earlier definition of power, something like: *A* dominates *B* when *A* affects *B* in a manner contrary to *B*'s interests. Nonetheless, this shift in terminology leads Lukes' himself to the question that provides the title for this essay: 'What is it that renders power over others dominating? And what is wrong with it?' (2005: 85). Because he has chosen to define domination in terms of constraints on human possibilities, rather than more narrowly as actual instances of some wills subordinating others, this leads him to frame the problem in terms of a conception of human nature, for which he turns to the philosopher Spinoza (2005: 73, 85-87, 114-116). From Spinoza he draws the lesson that

...power as domination is the ability to constrain the choices of others, coercing them or securing their compliance, by impeding them from living as their own nature and judgement dictate (2005: 85).

As the broader passage around this quote suggests, the modes of impediment are variable, including force, inducement and deception. But the consistent core of this conception is that domination by definition subverts the authenticity (‘being true to oneself’) and autonomy (‘thinking for oneself’) of the individual, impeding ‘the subject’s ability “to use reason correctly”’ (2005: 115). Lukes significantly qualifies this definition by maintaining that rationality can include Aristotelian practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and need not be construed narrowly as conscious, instrumental, rational calculation. Nonetheless, even with this elaboration, the ‘radical view’ appears to be decidedly *liberal* in its first principles--a point which is not offered as a criticism (see Gray 1986: 9-11 on Spinoza’s proto-liberalism).

Part of Lukes’ purpose with the new edition is to take account of influential contributions to debates about power in the years since the first edition, and in this regard two figures prove central, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, each providing a key foil for one of the two new chapters. If Lukes’ view was ‘radical’, he suggests that Foucault’s approach to power was ‘ultra-radical’ in a way that was ultimately either self-defeating or trivial, depending on how one interprets Foucault. Like many writers, he identifies multiple conceptions of power in Foucault, associated with different stages of his work. On the one hand there is the earlier Foucault (from the 1970s) whose emphasis on the socially pervasive and ‘productive’ nature of power resonates to a degree with Lukes’ ‘third dimension’ and the latter’s concern with how power can cultivate accommodating beliefs and desires. However, this emphasis in Foucault was linked to often extreme claims about how ‘the subject is “constituted” through subjection (*assujétissement*) to power’ (2005: 95), in ways that seemed to render the idea of the autonomous rational agent an illusion—a position that is clearly

at odds with how Lukes grounds his definition of domination. Lukes suggests that the 'final Foucault' associated with ideas of 'governmentality' and 'practices of the self', begins to concede the necessity of some idea of an autonomous self-creating subject, but that this effectively undermines his earlier position. In these final formulations, Foucault's 'constitution of the subject by power' becomes, for Lukes, nothing more than the sociological commonplace that individuals are socialised amid conditions that are beyond their control. It is a powerful criticism, but one I will be suggesting poses problems for Lukes as well.

Lukes is obviously more sympathetic to the work of Bourdieu, who's concepts of 'habitus' and 'symbolic violence' provide a provocative means of fleshing out how domination is naturalised and rendered 'invisible' by being encoded in bodily dispositions and everyday practices, beyond the reach of conscious articulation and critical reflection. Nonetheless, he chafes at the familiar and somewhat fatalistic bourdieusian contention that the 'inscription of social structures in bodies' results in an 'extraordinary inertia' (Lukes quoting Bourdieu 2005: 143) of processes of domination, contending instead that rational discourses of social critique (e.g. marxism and feminism) have had significant effects, altering the understandings and thus horizons of possibility for the dominated.

For Lukes, neither Foucault's initial strategy of assimilating all knowledge and reason to forms of domination, nor Bourdieu's strategy of downgrading discursive knowledge as a causal process in relation to the materialisation and embodiment of social hierarchy, are satisfactory responses to the question of domination. In different



ways, both dismiss the relevance of the idea of the individual rational agent, which is, as we have seen, constitutive of Lukes' definition of domination.

### **III. Conceptual asymmetry**

My first line of criticism is perhaps the most fundamental, and one not really addressed by Lukes to my knowledge. The lines of criticism presented in the next two sections are ones he is well aware of, though I find myself unsatisfied with how he deals with them. The focus of this section is on the descriptive utility of the concept of domination, its normative import being held aside until the next section.

The preceding section should substantiate the assertion that Lukes' conception of domination places its accent on defining the condition of being dominated, that is, the constraining of individual authenticity, autonomy and rationality, with less to say about the definition of being dominant, or of the relationship between the dominant and the dominated, of domination. The question then is, why might this lopsidedness be a problem? Fundamentally, I argue that the social analysis of power must be an analysis of *social relationships*, and that the most analytically useful concepts of 'domination' will be centred on the relationship between the dominated and the dominant, not on the criteria that defines one or the other status. Definitions of these statuses need to sit within overarching conceptions of the relationship of domination. As the previous quote from Lukes suggests, a certain minimal relationship is implied, someone has 'the ability to constrain the choice of others' (2005: 85), but with Lukes our attention is directed much more to the effects of those constraints on the 'others', than on the nature and basis of the 'ability'.

Debates in the literature about the place of ‘intention’ in the definition of power relations (and more specifically relations of domination) are particularly relevant here. Many writing on the subject have insisted that having power necessarily involves the realisation of intentions (e.g., Russell 2004: 23; Morriss 2002: 25-28; Wrong 2002: 3-5). Wrong, for instance, treats ‘power’ as a subcategory of ‘influence’, with the specification hinging on whether the effects of one’s actions are intended: ‘power is identical with intended and effective influence’ (Wrong 2002: 4). Lukes objects to this kind of specification, arguing that

...most of our actions bring in their wake innumerable chains of unintended consequences, some of them highly significant, and some of these seem obviously instances of power. Powerful people, for example, induce deferential behaviour in others but may not intend to. Pollsters can unintentionally influence the outcomes of elections. Routine rule following can have unanticipated consequences as the environment changes. ... The field of economic power abounds in such instances, where decisions—to raise prices, say, or to invest—foreclose or enable opportunities and choices for unknown others, and creditors have power over debtors. What actors intentionally do always generates chains of unintended consequences and it is implausible to deny that some of these manifest their power (2005: 76).

Recognising and considering the same permeable boundary between intended and unintended effects of the powerful, Wrong proffers contrary advice:

Does not the elephant who dances with chickens exercise a power of life and death over them though he has no desire to trample them underfoot? Do not the acts of governments today shape and destroy the lives of millions even though these outcomes in no way were intended or even foreseen by shortsighted statesmen? Yet rather than equate power with all forms of influence, unintended as well as intended, it seems preferable to stress the fact that the intentional control of others is likely to create a relationship in which the power holder exercises unintended influence over the power subject that goes far beyond what he may have wished or envisaged at the outset (2002: 4).

The difference in these perspectives are at the heart of this essay, and raise debates about how we assign moral responsibility and the difference between domination and social control that I will address in the following sections. For the moment I simply want to address what this says about what I have called ‘conceptual asymmetry’.

Lukes and Wrong would seem to proceed from almost contrary intellectual concerns here—Lukes wanting to be certain that no conceivable instance of domination is allowed to escape our definitional boundaries, while Wrong wants to reign in the conceptual apparatus, in order to make it more precise. The cost of Lukes approach is that it renders the concepts of the dominant and domination so diffuse that it becomes very difficult to anchor the concept in any way other than how he has done, that is, by specifying the negative effects on the dominated individual. As the causes of these effects can come from so many sources, through so many routes, the relational nature of domination loses focus. Domination looks more like an existential human condition, than a specifiable type of social relationship.

As a way of elaborating what I mean by ‘conceptual asymmetry’ let me explore a classic conception of power as domination that does possess what I would call ‘symmetry’, that of Max Weber’s *Herrschaft*. I would start by noting that *Herrschaft* has a broad range of meanings and connotations (domination, dominion, reign, rule, authority, leadership) that are notoriously difficult to translate into a single English word (see Swedberg 2005: 111-112). But it is perhaps significant that writers in English have usually opted either for ‘authority’ (Parsons 1947: 152; Wrong 2002: 36-38) or ‘domination’ (Bendix 1960: 289-300; Roth 1978: LXXXVIII-C), a pair of alternatives that budding students of social power often find perplexing, because these terms are normally viewed as incompatible, the former implying power with some basis of legitimacy, the latter implying power precisely in the absence of legitimacy. It is difficult enough for Anglophones, especially those with leftward radical leanings, to regard the term ‘authority’ as value-neutral and descriptive, let alone to regard the term ‘domination’ in this manner. Be this as it may, I read Weber’s concept of *Herrschaft* as an attempt to conceptualise in a matter-of-fact, relatively value-neutral and descriptive way, regularities in social power relations. Although he signals the fact that his primary interest is in the application of the concept to situations where there is socially recognised authority (Weber 1978: 946), the concept itself is broader than this, encompassing at least part of Lukes third dimension of power.

Weber builds symmetry into his definition of *Herrschaft* with his language of ‘command’ and ‘obedience’:

Domination was defined above ... as the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons . It

thus does not include every mode of exercising “power” or “influence” over other persons. Domination (“authority”) in this sense may be based on the most diverse motives of compliance: all the way from simple habituation to the most purely rational calculation of advantage. Hence every genuine form of domination implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an *interest* (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience (1978: 212, italics in original)

Here, domination (in Weber’s admittedly broad sense) is the relationship of regular obedience between the issuer and the follower of commands. Weber’s notion of ‘commands’ was rather fungible and metaphorical, in that it could cover anything from explicit directives from an authority to those subject to that authority, to the more general internalisation of the values and ends of rulers on the part of the ruled, to the outer limits of what he called ‘domination by virtue of a constellation of interests’ (1978: 943), typical of capitalist economic relations, in which the ‘commands’ seem to be nothing more than the disembodied imperatives of the marketplace, and the power subject’s ‘obedience’ appears to be just self-interested strategic response to that environment (even when this works in favour of monopolists in the marketplace). One has the sense that the idea of ‘command’ is being stretched to the breaking point here, where the command-giver is a combination of the structures of a given market and those best positioned to benefit from it, and the command-taker may have only a vague sense of the origins of the commands they respond to. But the virtue of such a ‘symmetrical’ conception, even at the breaking point, is that it at least provides us with a device to try to trace out and specify the links between the dominated and their dominators.

Lukes notes the breadth and non-evaluative nature of Weber's conception of domination, and objects to it on that basis:

The trouble with this definition, from our point of view, is that it does not limit the idea of domination to subjection or subjugation-inducing acquiescence, where power is an imposition or constraint, working against the interests of those subject to it. Weber's concept is compatible with a wide range of positive power relations to which the dominated may willingly comply and from which they and others benefit overall (2005:112).

Indeed, despite overlaps, by 'domination', Lukes and Weber mean different things. The trouble with Lukes' definition of domination, from the (somewhat weberian) point of view I have been trying to articulate here, is not that he wants to define domination more specifically in terms of harm done to the power subject, but that he wants to define harm primarily as a condition of the power subject, rather than as a kind of social relationship. This takes us to the next section.

#### **IV. Criticism and culpability**

In the preceding section I argued that, as a descriptive-analytic concept, Lukes' notion of domination is insufficiently relational, under-specifying what makes an agent a 'dominator'. Here I further argue that, to the degree that we want a concept that is also normative, providing a basis for social evaluation and criticism, this under-specification continues to pose problems. Through his broad concept of domination,

Lukes understandably wants to capture forms of harm to human agents that might not otherwise be recognised as such, thus maximising the sphere of social critique. But I argue that under-specification of what makes an agent a ‘dominator’ blunts the concept’s critical edge. Lukes asserts quite clearly in the last pages of the first PRV:

My claim, in other words, is that to identify a given process as an ‘exercise of power’, rather than as a case of ‘structural determination’, is to assume that it is *in the exerciser’s or exercisers’ power* to act differently. In the case of the collective exercise of power, or the part of a group, or institution etc., this is to imply that the members of the group or institution could have combined or organised to act differently (2005: 57, italics in original).

Thus the third dimension of power, domination, entails at least partial responsibility for actions, even when these are acts of omission, unconsciously perpetrated, or carried out by complex collectivities without centralised agency. In considering ‘why we need a concept of power’, Morriss (2002: 36-46) argues that, in regard to its normative import, we need to distinguish between ‘moral’ and ‘evaluative’ purposes. On the one hand we assign moral responsibility for the outcomes of actions according to whether the actor had the power to do otherwise, or the capacity to foresee any negative outcomes. We need to know the powers of the actor in question in order to assign moral responsibility to their actions. On the other hand, we can evaluate social systems according to how they handle power—how much collective power is generated by a given set of social relations, and how that power is distributed among the members of the society in question. This of course implies some notion of criteria in relation to which one evaluates—e.g., more collective power is better than less;

there are optimum distributions of power, neither too homogeneous nor too unequal; etc.. At any rate, Morriss offers this distinction in part as a response to Lukes and William Connolly (1993), accusing them of leaping precipitously from the ‘evaluative’ to the ‘moral’ contexts for judging power relations:

What is wrong with being powerless is that you *are* powerless—that is, lacking in power. And if people are powerless because they live in a certain sort of society—that is, they would have more power if the social arrangements were changed—then that, itself, is a condemnation of *that* society. A radical critique of society requires us to evaluate that society, not distribute praise or blame to *people*. The two are very different procedures, and must be sharply distinguished (2002: 41-42, italics in original)

Lukes thinks Morriss’s distinction is overly sharp, and thereby misleading. The structural inequities of power that we might be inclined to evaluate negatively (he uses the example of distorted housing markets) are partially constituted by the culpable, self-interested actions and inactions of sets of actors, even while the complex social relations thereby generated are beyond the intentional design of any of the actors concerned. But of course Morriss is distinguishing between two kinds of purposes for the concept of power, not claiming that messy reality sorts itself into bundles suitable only for one or the other mode of assessment.

What seems to be at stake here is a question about what constitutes social criticism. For Lukes this seems to require the assignment of moral responsibility, for Morriss it is the more detached evaluation according to chosen criteria that is the heart of the



matter. In Morriss's 'evaluative context' some notion of the 'good society' with 'good power relations' needs to be articulated, to provide the criteria by which a social system is to be evaluated. With Lukes, as we have seen, the key criteria lies not in a conception of a kind of society, but in a conception of the fully realised individual, Spinoza's authentic, autonomous, reasoning person, against which society is to be measured. Although it is clear that a radical critique of capitalist society is what lies behind and drives much of Lukes' argument about domination, in that all kinds of societies, in various ways, pose obstacles to individual self-determination, Lukes argument can tend to read like a critique of society *per se*, rather than of a particular kind of society. If we view ourselves as creatures made for society, then this is indeed a discouraging position to find ourselves in. For this reason, despite his disapproval of Foucault's reduction of subjectivity to its constituting power relations, a similar sense of being enmeshed in webs of domination from which we cannot extract ourselves haunts Lukes' argument. The image of the individual whose authenticity and autonomy have been harmed is clear and central, embedded in a ramifying network of relations, suffused with domination. Here we begin to anticipate the theme of the next section.

It is notable that much of the debate generated by Lukes' PRV has focused on the question of how one identifies the 'real interests' of individuals whose autonomy has been injured, and understanding of their own interests distorted, by domination (McLachlan 1981). Correspondingly Luke's has had to defend himself against charges of employing a condescending notion of 'false consciousness' in regard to the average person and their understanding of their own interests (Hay 1997). Let me circumvent a review of these debates, which is tangential to my aims here, and simply

say that I agree with Lukes (2005: 146-150) on this point. We should not become so 'respectful' of each others views that we discard our ability to talk about each other as potentially being deceived, mislead, confused and mistaken, potentially in regard fundamental and far-reaching matters. The point I want to make however, is at one level of remove, about the focus of these debates with Lukes. I think this is an effect of the 'conceptual asymmetry' I was describing in the previous section. Having formulated a concept of domination primarily in terms of the status of being dominated, rather than that of being dominant, or certain patterns of relations between the two, it follows that debates have revolved around our ability to infer the real interests of those presumed to be dominated, and our respect for the authenticity and autonomy of their own judgments about themselves. Relatively little ink has been spilt over who does or does not get accused of benefiting from domination, and how, in the light of Lukes' third dimension of power, partly because the answers are potentially so disparate.

## **V. Domination versus social control**

Forty years ago Dennis Wrong made a crucial point of continuing relevance for the study of power: 'We must distinguish the diffuse controls exercised by the group over socialized individuals from direct, intentional efforts by a specific person or group to control another' (1968: 676; see also 2002: 3-5). As we have seen, it is the latter that defines social power for Wrong. Reprising this argument thirty-five years later, Wrong adds:

But if the unintended and unforeseen effects of the exercise of power are often more enduring and consequential than the intended effects, why not, it might be argued, include them in the very definition of power? The answer is that to do so would make *any* social effect equivalent to an exercise of power. Power relations would then become identical with the entire subject-matter of sociology as the study of how human action (including beliefs and emotions) is generated, shaped and constrained by the structures and networks of social relations in which we are all enmeshed from birth. Power would be collapsed into social control and would include diffuse control of the One by the Many as well as the relatively permanent past effects of power embodied in internalized norms (the superego), taken-for-granted beliefs and even language itself which, as contemporary linguistic philosophers have shown, contains built-in preconceptions, prejudgments and evaluations. Solipsists, complete libertarian individualists, and believers in the possibility and desirability of a ‘natural man’ uncontaminated by social influence might be prepared to accept such an equation of power and social control, but it is unlikely to appeal to many others. Even if the power of the parent over the child is the very matrix of human character formation, it hardly seems useful to treat socialized human nature itself as entirely the product of the exercise of power, which would rob the concept of all specificity (2002: 252-253).

Now, I would want to say that social power in its broadest sense of the general human capacity for agency, if not ‘identical with’, is at least co-extensive with the ‘entire subject matter of sociology’. But Wrong is clearly more concerned with

‘power over’ than with ‘power to’ in this passage. At any rate, here again Wrong’s main concern is to reign in the concept, bringing to mind the old adage that something that explains everything, explains nothing. For the present discussion, the key question becomes—is Lukes one of the ‘believers in the possibility and desirability of a “natural man” uncontaminated by social influence’ that Wrong is asking us to part company with? I believe Lukes is susceptible to, if not entirely guilty of, the charge. He begins to confront this question head on at the very end of the second edition of PRV:

After all, enculturation is the source of much that we take to be true, right and good, and our reflective beliefs and desires presuppose and derive from countless others that we simply take for granted. What can make the securing of compliance through the acquisition of beliefs and the formation of preferences count as exemplifying ‘domination’? (2005: 144).

Frustratingly however, in addressing the question he has put to himself Lukes’ is characteristically diverted onto the admittedly important but different question of whether there is a proper place for suitably qualified concepts of ‘false consciousness’ and an ‘external standpoint’ for the judgement of ‘real interests’ as implied in the third dimension perspective. I have already indicated my support for his positions that there is. But this rather sidesteps the problem posed by Wrong—and I suggest this is because radical view does not equip him well to make this distinction. The closest we come is in the earlier quote originating in the 1974 edition of PRV, where he suggests that power (i.e. domination) is distinguished from ‘structural determination’, which tends to take the place of socialisation/enculturation for Lukes,

when ‘it is *in the exerciser’s or exercisers’ power* to act differently’ (2005: 57). But ‘structural determination’ is not quite the same thing as ‘social control’. Both concern how the choices of actors are ultimately constrained, but the former attributes this to the unfolding historical logic of economic power, while the latter attributes it to the very requirements of society as such, in all times and places. More tellingly, the idea of structural determination is bound up with a tradition of social criticism that seeks to explain under what conditions political (proletarian) radicalism is or is not possible. The idea of social control, as used by Wrong and many sociologists who cut their teeth during the heyday of Parsonian functionalism, is bound up with a tradition of social analysis that positively values social stability (often to a fault, as most now acknowledge, and Wrong himself points out 2002: 238-247).

This, I think, brings us to the heart of the matter. Bernard Yack has spelled out what is at stake here in his book *The Longing for Total Revolution* (1992). He argues that we are the inheritors of a modernist European intellectual tradition of social analysis and criticism, stretching back to Rousseau and running through Marx and Nietzsche, in which modern society is seen as inherently dehumanising, as itself the chief obstacle to the realisation of our human potential. Desires for profound social transformation arise throughout the histories of civilisations, across time and cultures, according to the tribulations of the day. But Yack argues that with modernity there developed a peculiarly intense belief among generations of philosophers and intellectuals that the causes of alienation and unfreedom lay in the nature of modern society itself, its institutional order, which forces its members to engage in inauthentic forms of social interaction that frustrate the full realisation of their free natures. Thus they called for an ultimate, historical solution in the form of political (Marx) or cultural (Nietzsche)

revolution, or uneasy reconcillations with our estranged condition (Schiller, Hegel). Yack's project in this book is a genealogy of this intellectual and normative disposition, focussing primarily on the German philosophical tradition, but the repercussions of this worldview, if often in less fevered forms, can easily be detected in the more specifically sociological tradition that includes Tönnies, Durkheim, Polanyi and Foucault, to name only a few. Built into the intellectual traditions we inhabit, there is a constant gravitational pull toward this totalising idea of how modern society impedes human self-realisation, both for the individual, and the species. The concept of 'social control' is a case in point, in that Wrong's usage seems dated by contemporary standards. After decades of conflict theories of deviance, the term has migrated, such that its conventional usage today usually suggests the overbearing regulation of human behaviour by a combination of hegemonic social norms and judicial and penal institutions (e.g. Chriss 2008). Caught in this gravitational pull, the term 'social control' has lost its much of its functionalist descriptive purpose, to become more of a broad name for one of the fundamental evils of modern society.

Underpinning Yack's account of this tradition are two core contentions. First, that prevalent conceptions of modernity make a 'fetish' of it, exaggerating the degree to which modernity is a bounded, coherent whole, confronting humanity with a single, key problematic for human betterment (1992: xiv). Secondly, he argues that the idea that there ever was, or could be in the future, a form of society that did not place very real limits on human potential, is an illusion: 'In the end, if we view the dependence of institutions on external conditioning as dehumanizing, then we had better become accustomed to living with dehumanization; for dehumanization will exist in every institution and form of social interaction' (1992: 367).

Let me return to Lukes. Yack's argument suggests a continuum, from those who posit a total problem and prescribe a total, revolutionary solution (à la Marx), to those who sense a total problem, but are more uncertain and/or ambivalent about a remedy.

Lukes' radical view seems to fall at the latter end of this continuum. It is, for me, what I have called his 'lopsided' conception of domination, primarily in terms of limitations on individual autonomy and authenticity, which clearly links him to the tradition that Yack is talking about. The starting point of his analysis seems to be that there are impediments to living as our 'own nature and judgement dictate' (2005: 85), and that tracing out the causes of these will identify domination and lead us to the dominant who could act so as to remove these impediments. Clearly some such tracings will lead us to identify certain agents who exercise an ability to constrain the choices of others, but other tracings will lead us to sources of Wrong's social control, too diffuse and systemic to be cleanly attached to particular agents, but nonetheless constraining our capacity to make free choices. And when we allow as in Lukes' formulation, that those constrained may not be aware that they are constrained, then teasing apart domination from social control becomes a very difficult task.

Lukes wrestles most closely with this problem in his discussion of 'human nature' (2005: 117-124). Combining the 'capabilities approach' developed by Martha Nussbaum (2000) and Amartya Sen (2002), and the importance placed on the 'recognition of identities' by authors such as Charles Taylor (1992), he tentatively suggests that our common sense intuition that individual and collective identities deserve respect ultimately boils down to the acknowledgement that respect for the basic human capacity for authenticity, autonomy and self-definition provides an objective baseline for normative evaluation. But this falls short of grappling with the key problem. To say that some constraints on authenticity and autonomy are wrong,

implies either that all constraints are wrong as well, or that some are right. To suggest that some constraints on human freedom are avoidable is to suggest either that all such constraints are avoidable, or that some are not. It is questionable whether we can develop a clear idea of what kinds of constraints are wrong and preventable, apart from a corresponding idea of what kinds of constraint are right and inevitable. But it is the latter issue that tends to be left aside in Lukes' radical view.

The crux of this problem (which is vexing for anyone trying to conceptualise domination, not just Lukes) is our strong, modernist inclination to think that there is something unnatural in the limitation of human freedom. At one level there is a problem here of eliding the distinction between the specific and the general when talking about human nature. From specifiable constraints harming individual natures (e.g. denying someone opportunities conventionally available in their society because of their race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc.) we easily and illegitimately slide to the general thesis that constraint as such is contrary to human nature. But there is a deeper problem: an often hidden presumption of natural harmony between individual and society, such that constraints on autonomy are seen as. Thus in articulating the capabilities approach with which he sympathises, Lukes proposes that

...as both Marx and Aristotle held, human beings are distinguished from animals in being self-directed: in being able to shape their lives 'in cooperation and reciprocity with others, rather than being passively shaped or pushed around by the world in the manner of a "flock" or "herd" of animals' (Lukes 2005: 117-118; material in quotes from Nussbaum 2000: 72).

This is indeed true, but it's a two-way street. We are also distinguished from other animals by our elaborate and complex symbolic social mechanisms for limiting,



regulating, in a word constraining individual behaviour (the classic example of the incest taboo comes immediately to mind). This is to say that it is also in our natures to have our wills, desires, preferences, in short our behaviour, shaped and moulded, for better and for worse, by the web of social relations into which we are born, and live ‘enmeshed’. Human society arises precisely out of the tensions between individual wills and impulses and the collective need for viable social organisation unnatural (see Wrong’s plea for a Freudian dimension to sociological theory in *The Problem of Order* 1994). Some of the social order is explicitly negotiated, at least engaging autonomous individuals in its formation, but human beings are too frail to bear the burden of consciously and deliberately designing their entire social world—much of it, by necessity, is socially reproduced and modified unconsciously, by habit, custom and convention and localised adaptation. This is the point that generations of virtue ethicists, from Hume up to MacIntyre, have made against those who would ground all morality in explicit conceptualisations of rights and duties (Crisp and Slote 1997). The difficulty with Lukes’ radical view is that this side of our natures, the side that is designed to be constrained, gets lost, and it needs to be found, and included in the discussion, if we are going to pin down more precisely what he means by domination.

## **VI. Conclusion: a conceptual ensemble**

It was suggested at the outset, and deserves to be reiterated, that far from being eccentric, Lukes’ concept of domination operates within the perimeters of what that term is conventionally taken to mean. The main thrust of my argument has been that his most recent efforts to sharpen the concept focus mainly on the ill-effects of

domination on the dominated, the subversion of human nature, to the neglect of a more systematic conceptualisation of *kinds of relations of domination*. I think greater attention needs to be paid to disaggregating the concept, to distinguishing the different modes in which domination operates, or at least the different senses of the word as it is commonly used. Basic to this approach is an idea that domination is an overall effect of multiple and variable dimensions of unequal power relations, that cannot meaningfully summed up as relations between As and Bs. So let me provisionally sketch some of the key ‘kinds of relations of domination’, allowing that this could be amended and elaborated, in the hope that by the contrast, the reservations I have about Lukes’ approach will be made clearer.

***Strategic control:*** this term specifies the intentional effort to make the dominated act in ways that prioritise and serve the dominant’s interests, as the dominant understands it, notwithstanding any rationalisations on the part of the dominant (or the dominated) about how the interests of the dominated are also being served. In keeping with conventional uses of the term ‘domination’ I would associate the term with a relatively stable, ongoing, usually institutionalised state-of-affairs, not just any episodic success of an individual or group in realising their aims (Scott 2001: 16). Some classic examples would be the institution of slavery, a deliberate corporate strategy of market monopoly, and the strategic use of modern advertising to shape consumer behaviour. Here the *relationship* of domination hinges on an agents’ intention to have affects on the subject of their actions.

***Advantageous position:*** this term identifies those aspects of power superiority (greater access to resources, positions of influence) that may not derive from the

powerful's will to dominate, and success in the pursuit of power, but from historical happenstance, the benefits of which may be as naturalised and implicit for those who enjoy advantage as for those who suffer disadvantage in such situations. Familiar examples include inherited wealth and status, but even personal attributes such as beauty and charm can contribute on an individual level. Here the *relationship* is a matter varying positions between the dominant and the dominated as defined by a social terrain of resources. There is a clear military-spatial metaphor at work.

***Malign influence:*** with a clearer normative dimension, this term specifies the ways agents and institutions have *negative but unintended* (though not necessarily unknown) effects on individuals and society more generally, in a regular, ongoing fashion. It does not imply that the influence of such agents/institutions need be only or completely malign. Thus when we bemoan the ecological and economic affects of the wasteful consumer behaviour in affluent countries, we may be critical of the social impact of such behaviour on the lives of people in poorer countries whose economies are heavily shaped by such behaviour, without wanting to entirely condemn market relations, or to suggest that such effects are intended by the fortunately affluent. There is a clear influence of Morriss's evaluative/moral distinction here. The term implies identification of a definite causal *relationship*, albeit one only weakly grasped by the actors involved, especially the dominant.

***Negligence:*** obviously has a legal (and again more normative) ring to it, and is meant to identify sins of omission, not the unintended ill-effects of malign influence, but the failure of some competent agent to act within its normal sphere of powers to either prevent harm, or foster well-being as appropriate to its publicly recognised social role

(caretaker to child, state to citizens). Alternative terms here might be ‘poor stewardship’ or ‘lack of care’. This begins to move away from more conventional senses of domination as active control with negative effects, but in complex, highly stratified state-based societies, the inaction of the powerful sets the limits of human possibilities as much as the pursuit of strategic control. Here the *relationship* assumes an imbalance of power between the subject and object of power, but that in itself is not a point of criticism. Instead, what is being identified is a failure to fulfil the obligations of that relationship on the part of the dominant.

Obviously any thoroughgoing analysis of domination will not simply parcel out reality between these categories (and any others deemed necessary and useful), but rather to see them as set of conceptual tools for bringing out the multiple sides of a complex whole. Crucial to what I have been arguing, each is meant to specify a particular kind of relationship, kinds of relationships that often come together as a package (consider the complex workings of patriarchy). My most basic plea is that we should avoid the temptation to boil down these complexities into one simple conception of domination, that encourages us to confound different kinds of relations, variously involving intent, action, and social positioning.

So what, in the end, is wrong with domination? I don’t think we can answer this by identifying constraints on the autonomy of individuals, because individuals are made to be constrained in some respects, this is a part of our nature. And I think there is an inherent tension, one I have not tried to resolve above, between the descriptive (as in Weber’s *Herrschaft*) and normative *cum* critical uses of the concept. It is perfectly reasonable to talk in terms of a distinction between good and bad forms of

domination, if one does not regard domination as by definition a form of harm or ‘wrong-doing’. But by convention, the term normally does carry this negative evaluative meaning. So if we are going to cleave to this convention we at least need to articulate our concept of domination, as illegitimate control and influence by some over others, in tandem with some conception of legitimate control and influence by some over others, as with many conceptions of parental authority. And there will inevitably be an irreducible zone of debate over which conception applies in particular cases.

To the extent that we want a purely critical concept, I think it will have to rely on external standards of fairness and social duty, and to treat domination as a pattern of social relations that characteristically runs afoul of these standards. Thus in the preliminary inventory above, ‘strategic control’ is wrong when it is achieved through deception, manipulation, and coercion. ‘Advantageous position’ is wrong in matters where we believe there should be a level playing field. ‘Malign influence’ is wrong to the degree that the influenced are harmed, and the influential fail to reflect adequately on the consequences of their actions. And ‘negligence’ is wrong either because there is a specific failure to meet recognised obligations, or a failure to recognise obligations as such in the first instance. These are different kinds of ‘wrongness’ and their wrongness derives not from the nature of these relations themselves, but from the moral standards by which we judge them. If we think that domination is always wrong, it will nonetheless be wrong in a variety of ways.

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